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THE LAST EXPEDITION OF JOSIAH GREGG

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While engaged in historical research relating to the northwestern section of California, the writer fortunately came into possession of the facts dealing with the closing events in the life of Dr. Josiah Gregg, a man recognized by the student of the history of the Southwest as one of the most important explorers and writers for that part of the United States; the author of *Commerce of the Prairies, or the Journal of a Santa Fe Trader*. Believing that a short account of the experiences of Dr. Gregg and his party during this expedition, which proved the last for its noted leader, might prove of interest to the students of Western history, the following article has been prepared.

Several attempts have hitherto been made to ascertain the identity of Josiah Gregg: to find out if possible the earlier events in his life as well as to learn what became of him after he had published his extremely popular work. Previous attempts, however, have met with only partial success. Dr. Reuben G. Thwaites, Secretary of the Wisconsin Historical Society and editor of that most valuable collection of historical sources entitled *Early Western Travels*, reprints in full the work of Josiah Gregg but fails to give many facts regarding the author himself, although in a subsequent letter he claims to have spent a great deal of time in looking up data regarding him.¹ Later Mr. W. E. Connelley became interested in the matter and fortunately was able to locate members of the Gregg family from whom information was obtained regarding his early life. These facts are published in a long footnote in Connelley's *Doniphan's Expedition*, but although of value for the earlier period of his life the facts here given fail to offer any clear account of his experiences after coming to California, except to say that he probably met his death while mining upon the Trinity River.² A study of the original sources relating to the history of the northwestern part

¹Connelley, *Doniphan's Expedition*, 168.

²*Ibid.*, 162-176.

of the state leaves no doubt regarding the identity of the man and reveals the fact that his last days were spent in a manner well becoming the true scientific spirit that possessed him.

In his early life Josiah Gregg suffered from poor health and so at the age of twenty-five left his home in Missouri to join the spring caravan then leaving for the Mexican outpost at Santa Fé. For the next nine years he engaged regularly in the business, himself becoming one of the proprietors of the Santa Fé trade. By this means he became thoroughly familiar with the country and people of northern Mexico, and being of a scientific turn of mind he displayed great interest in whatever he came in contact with and made careful notes of all his observations and impressions. At the request of his friends these were published in a work of two volumes in the year 1844, being issued simultaneously in both New York and London.

This work, *Commerce of the Prairies*, was immediately received with great enthusiasm and two more editions were issued during the following year; to be followed later by a fourth and fifth edition, and in 1857 by a sixth, under a somewhat different title. Not only was this popularity enjoyed among American and English readers but the work was also translated into German, and three editions published in that language between the years 1845 and 1847. Dr. Thwaites declares him "pre-eminently the historian of the Santa Fé trade," and describes his book as "a classic in the literature of Western history," that it "stands without a rival, and is indispensable to a full knowledge of the American past."³

Although he had returned to his home in Missouri, Gregg was once again called to the frontier when the Mexican War broke out; this time to act as a newspaper correspondent, a position for which his literary ability and knowledge of the country very ably fitted him. At the first news of the discovery of gold in California he joined in the migration to the El Dorado and in the fall of 1849 was to be found in the northern part of the state among the miners upon the Trinity River. It was here that the opening events in the last chapter in his career took place.

As winter approached with its consequent high water which

³Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, XIX, 15.

drove the miners from the rich river bars, and which also was sure to cause a scarcity of food to carry the large population through the months of enforced idleness, many of the men prepared to leave the mines. A great number drifted to San Francisco and other centers, where their earnings were soon gathered in by the amusement and gambling resorts. To Josiah Gregg, however, this respite from mining offered an opportunity for wider activity.

The Trinity mines were greatly handicapped because they were so difficult of access, being located far up the Sacramento Valley and separated even from this by an almost impassable mountain barrier. On the other hand it was believed that but a short distance lay between these mines and the mouth of the river, which, as its name implies, was supposed to enter the ocean through the bay known to the Spaniards and named by them Trinidad Bay. During the mining season there was no time for explorations, but if during the idle period a shorter route could be discovered it would be a most desirable and probably also profitable undertaking. Furthermore, according to the Indian guides, there was at eight days' distance a beautiful bay surrounded by fertile fields, which might offer opportunities for settlement and commerce. Such an adventure appealed most strongly to the scientific mind of Gregg, so it was but natural that he should become the leader of a body of men who had as their object the exploration of the country lying to the west of them.

One of the members, who has left a narrative of the expedition, says,⁴

Among the first and most active in getting up and organizing the expedition was a gentleman by the name of Josiah Gregg, a physician by profession, formerly of Missouri. He had with him all the implements necessary to guide us through the uninhabited, trackless region of country that lay between us and the point to be sought. No one seemed better qualified to guide and direct

⁴The source of information for this expedition is a narrative by L. K. Wood, one of the party. It was originally published in the *Humboldt Times*, April 26, 1856, seq., and has more than once been reprinted in it and other Eureka papers and also in pamphlet form by his son. It may be found in the Kentucky State Historical Society, *Register*, VI, 19-32; in Elliott, *History of Humboldt County, California*, 83-95; and in paraphrase in Bledsoe, *Indian Wars of the Northwest*, 73-103; and Hittell, *History of California*, III, 817-832.

an expedition of this kind than he. Upon him, therefore, the choice fell to take command.

The party as at first organized consisted of twenty-four men but when the storms, which had been most severe during the previous month, did not abate as the time approached for the departure, the number was reduced to but eight of the most determined ones. These men, notwithstanding the fact that even the Indian guides now refused to go, were only the more resolute in their determination, and so on the fifth of November, 1849, with rations for about ten days they set out over the mountains in the direction indicated by the Indians, little thinking of the hardships and suffering that were to be their almost constant companions on the way. They had not proceeded far, however, before they began to realize something of the difficulty of the task that was theirs, for when they had slowly worked their way through the deep snow to the summit of the mountain they looked toward the west only to see innumerable ranges of mountains piling up before them. But once having taken up the task they were only the more firmly resolved to carry it to completion.

On the evening of the fifth day a welcome sound like that of the ocean surf met their ears and early the next morning one of their number was despatched ahead to investigate. He returned with sand which contained rich deposits of gold but reported that the sound was only that of a rushing mountain stream,⁵ which they now followed to its junction with the main river. They now considered following along the latter to the ocean, but the Indians of a *ranchería* near at hand warned them against that course on account of numerous bands of Indians who would oppose their progress in that direction, while to turn directly west across the mountains would lead them nearer their desired end.

From the Indians they had been able to secure a variation in their diet by an exchange of venison for smoked salmon, but on their second day from the Indian village their supply of provisions became entirely exhausted. They were even reduced to the point of dividing and consuming the soured paste that had formed on the inside of their flour sacks when these had been

⁵The South Fork of the Trinity River.

saturated by the rain. Space does not permit a full statement of, nor could our minds comprehend, the suffering these men underwent as they slowly worked their way through what appeared to be impassable mountains. Many days were spent without food, for in places even game was scarce, and often their animals had no other food than the leaves of the trees that were cut down for their use. Several times the little party halted to consider the question of turning back, but each time the decision was to move forward, for they believed that once having passed the mountains they would soon reach the ocean or at any rate find their progress much easier. But here again they were doomed to disappointment, for they were but to pass from the rugged mountains into a labyrinth of a primeval forest. The narrative says,

The redwood forests through which we had to pass, were more dense and difficult to penetrate than any before, consequently our progress was in proportion retarded. Dr. Gregg frequently expressed a desire to measure the circumference of some of these giants of the forest, and occasionally called upon some one of us to assist him. Not being in the most amiable state of mind and feeling at the time, and having neither ambition to gratify nor desire to enlighten the curious world, we not infrequently answered his calls with shameful abuse. His obstinate perseverance, however, in one or two instances, resulted in success.

Through this forest we could not travel to exceed two miles a day. The reason for this was the immense quantity of fallen timber that lay upon the ground in every conceivable shape and direction, and in many instances piled one upon another so that the only alternative left was literally to cut our way through. . . . We were obliged, therefore, constantly to keep two men ahead with axes, who, as occasion required, would chop off sufficient to construct a sort of a platform by means of which the animals were driven upon the log and forced to jump off on the opposite side.

At last after more than four weeks of travel their "ears were greeted with the welcome sound of the surf rolling and beating upon the sea-shore." The next morning two of the number proposed to go to the coast in advance of the party. This they did returning on the evening of the same day "bringing the glad tidings that they had reached the sea-shore, and that it was not

more than six miles distant." In spite of the fact that they were now so near they toiled "three long weary days" before they came out into the open country in view of the ocean.

They had reached the ocean just south of the stream known as Little River. Here they turned toward the north but soon found their advance blocked by the waters of Big Lagoon which lay between the dense forest and the ocean; they then decided to turn south again, this time stopping to examine a projecting headland, which in deference to their leader they named "Gregg's Point."⁶ Here Dr. Gregg stopped to determine the latitude of the place and carefully carved the result on the trunk of a tree near at hand for the benefit of any who might afterward visit the place. In March of the next year the crew of the *Cameo*, in exploring the coast found this inscription, which read as follows:⁷

"Lat. 41° 3' 32" Barometer 29° 86' Ther. Fah. 48° at 12 M. Dec. 7, 1849. J. Gregg."

These scientific observations of the leader came to be a source of annoyance to the other members of the party, and as he still persisted in making them, in spite of the toil and hardships they endured, he became subject to much abuse. Unfortunately this lack of harmony in the exploring party has been indelibly stamped upon the map of the region in the name of one of its most important streams, for they had not gone far along the coast to the south until they came to a stream which gave the appearance of being a large river, and without doubt suitable for navigation.

The Doctor wished to ascertain the latitude of the mouth of the river, in order hereafter to know where it was. This was of course opposed by the rest of the company. Regardless of this opposition, he proceeded to make his observation. We were, however, equally obstinate in adhering to the determination of proceeding without delay. Thus decided, our animals were speedily crossed over, and our blankets and ourselves placed in canoes—which we had procured from the Indians for this purpose—ready to cross. As the canoes were about pushing off, the Doctor, as if convinced that we would carry our determination into effect,

⁶This point was Trinidad Head, or Trinidad Bay, so named by the Spanish explorer Bodega in 1775. Thus unfortunately the name of Gregg was not to be permitted to remain upon the map.

⁷*Alta California*, April 1, 1850.

and he be left behind, hastily caught up his instruments and ran for the canoe, to reach which, however, he was compelled to wade several steps into the water. His cup of wrath was now filled to the brim; but he remained silent until the opposite shore was gained, when he opened upon us a perfect batter of the most withering and violent abuse. Several times during the ebullition of the old man's passion, he indulged in such insulting language and comparisons, that some of the party came near inflicting upon him summary punishment by consigning him, instruments and all, to this beautiful river. Fortunately for the old gentleman, pacific counsels prevailed, and we were soon ready and off again. This stream, in commemoration of the difficulty I have just related, we called Mad River.

The party now continued its way along the ocean beach, little mindful of the object of their search, but active in speculation upon the chances of their being able to make their way once more to a land of civilization. When night came they made camp where they were and now for the first time found a scarcity of water, consequently two of the number were sent out in search of this needed article. One of them returned with a kettleful of water which was found to have a brackish taste, and on being asked where he had obtained it replied laconically, "about a mile for here." Other inquiries brought the reply, "I dipped it from a bay of smooth water," but beyond that he had nothing to say. Early the next morning all the party were ready to move and soon their camp was pitched on the shore of the bay, which at the present time is known as Humboldt Bay.⁸

Finding that they would not be able to continue south along the beach on account of the entrance to the bay their route was now directed around the northern portion of the bay, which had been named by them Trinity Bay since they believed it to be the one discovered by the Spaniards. Christmas Day was spent in camp on a plateau at the head of the bay, the present site of the town of Arcata, their dinner being furnished by a band of elk which was found near camp the evening before. The next day the party followed an Indian trail south along the eastern

⁸This was the first discovery of Humboldt Bay during the American period, for although it had been known by the earlier fur-traders it had been little appreciated and soon forgotten. Early the next spring Eureka and other towns were established upon the bay which soon became the most important shipping center along this portion of the coast.

shore of the bay and camped at a point of land near a village of Indians who appear to have been very friendly. One day only did they remain in camp here when again they turned their faces toward the south.

It had been our intention at the outset if we succeeded in discovering the bay, and providing the surrounding country was adapted to agricultural purposes, and was sufficiently extensive, to locate claims for ourselves and lay out a town; but the deplorable condition in which we found ourselves, reduced in strength, health impaired, our ammunition nearly exhausted,—upon which we were entirely dependent, as well for the little food we could obtain, as for our defense and protection—and destitute of either farming or mechanical implements, induced us to abandon such intention, at least for the present, and use all possible despatch in making our way to the settlements.

The third day after leaving the bay the party came to another river, which on account of the large number of eels that they obtained from the Indians was called “Eel River.” The river was now very high because of the recent storms but canoes were secured from the Indians and a crossing made at a point just below the mouth of a branch stream now named “Van Duzen” in honor of one of the party. Here a difference of opinion arose between the members of the expedition as to the most advantageous route to pursue: some urging that they should follow down the coast; and others, that by following up this river they could the more easily cross the mountains and reach the settlements further south. No amount of argument was able to produce harmony, so the different proponents took their respective routes.

Mr. Wood, the writer of the narrative, with three others, followed up the river, while Dr. Gregg and the remainder of the party went south toward the coast. The river party made good progress for a few days but soon hardship overtook them. Fortunately they had kept the hide of a small deer which they had killed, for we are told this and a few buckeyes were all they had to sustain life, “the former we cut up and boiled in water and afterwards drank the water in which it had been boiled, and chewed the hide.” After continued hardships these men suc-

ceeded in reaching the settlements in what is now Sonoma County on the 17th of February, 1850.

The party which attempted to follow the coast was less fortunate. On account of the snow on the high ridges and the great number of gulches and ravines that impeded their progress they decided to turn toward the east and work their way across the mountains into the Sacramento Valley. Their supply of ammunition became exhausted and starvation threatened the whole party, and for the leader of the expedition, notwithstanding a life upon the frontier, this experience was too severe. One of the party relates,

Dr. Gregg continued to grow weaker, from the time of our separation, until one day he fell from his horse and died in a few hours without speaking—died from starvation—had had no meat for several days—had been living entirely upon acorns and herbs.

His death occurred on the 25th of February, 1850, in the vicinity of Clear Lake,⁹ where, to borrow one of his own expressions, he was "buried according to the custom of the prairies." "These funerals," he explains, "are usually performed in a very summary manner. A grave is dug in a convenient spot, and the corpse, with no other shroud than its own clothes, and only a blanket for a coffin, is consigned to the earth. The grave is then filled up with stones or poles, as a safeguard against the voracious wolves of the prairies."¹⁰ Thus ended the active life of Josiah Gregg, writer, merchant, scientist and explorer. In life an ardent lover of the frontier, she had now taken him to her bosom that their association might ever remain undisturbed.

⁹*Alta California*, March 7, 1850. Gibbs in Schoolcraft, III, 131.

¹⁰These words which so accurately describe the burial of Gregg are taken from his *Commerce of the Prairies*, I, 27, with note.